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ABSTRACT

This report describes a learning assistance program at Lamar University, Texas, designed to improve study skills and decrease attrition among college students through the use of peer counselors. The objectives of this two-credit, non-remedial course are discussed, and the material covered in the 18-week course is described, by week, in Table 1. Training for upperclassmen selected as peer counselors is discussed, and the academic schools enrolling the counselors during its 7-year history are listed in Table 2. The instructional materials used to train peer counselors are listed in Table 3, and core training skills and job specific training are outlined. The course enrollment data for students and peer counselors are detailed in Table 4, while the number and percent of students who pass and fail, and the number of drops and incompletes are listed in Table 5. The enrollment status 4 years later for the 163 students passing the course in the fall of 1978 is listed in Table 6, while the Scholastic Aptitude Test scores, retention rate, and probable attrition rate of these students are given in Table 7. The overall success of the program in improving students' learning skills and in improving retention rates is discussed. (JAC)

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REDUCING ATTRITION THROUGH STUDENT-TO-STUDENT STUDY SKILLS INSTRUCTION AND GUIDANCE

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Since the mid-1960's, increasingly larger numbers of non-traditional students have been recruited into America's junior and senior colleges. Historically, these students have been ill-prepared for the academic rigors of higher education. Without decisive assistance in developing effective learning skills, this increasingly large body of students quickly finds that the open door admissions policy really means nothing more than a revolving door to academic oblivion.

Nontraditional students are not the only ones lacking adequate learning skills. Regrettably, the public schools are producing many graduates who are deficient in reading, writing, listening, studying and computing skills. As higher education inherits these skill-deficient students, it faces three possible choices. First, it may continue to demand a high level of learning skills proficiency as the prerequisite for academic success and summarily fail those who cannot produce academic work measuring up to the standard. Secondly, it may lower the academic standards in order to maintain student enrollment and thereby undermine the credibility and integrity of the college experience. A third alternative is to acknowledge the fact that an ever increasing number of entering students will be poorly prepared and to develop appropriate programs to address the problem.

Fortunately, many institutions have come to the realization that the third approach provides the most productive answer. They are, therefore, proceeding with the development of learning assistance programs designed to meet the needs of underprepared students. Sullivan (1979), in an exhaustive three-year study of 2,878 higher education institutions, identified 1,848 such programs located on 1,433 separate campuses. As might be expected, these learning assistance activities varied greatly in function, focus and operation. However, the underlying objective for these programs focused on assisting students to become more efficient and effective learners so that they might better adapt to and benefit from the collegiate instruction offered.

Implementation of the program described in this report was assisted by an IMPACT Program grant received from the Exxon Education Foundation, New York, New York.

Although approximatley half of the higher education institutions had made an initial commitment to the improvement of student learning skills, the majority of these programs were found to be very modest in scope. Many programs involved the commitment of only one part-time professional and had an annual operating budget of less than $10,000. Higher education may have become aware of the importance of providing learning assistance, but little more than fiscal tokenism is currently being committed to the effort on most campuses.

Conceptually, learning assistance has established itself as a potentially productive approach for reducing student attrition. Administratively and fiscally, however, the concept is still struggling for full recognition and acceptance. The dearth of viable research designed to assess program effectiveness is one reason for administrative hesitation in committing institutional funds to support an adequate learning assistance program. Before further expanding their commitment, higher education administrators want to see meaningful proof that learning assistance programs are, indeed, accomplishing the twin goals of improving academic performance and reducing college dropouts. To date, published evaluations of learning assistance effectiveness have been few in number and have mostly dealt with outcomes over a period of one or two semesters. The urgent need is for rigorous evaluation research spanning four years or more. The purpose of this report is to provide such an analysis by describing and evaluating the student-to-student study skills instruction and guidance program at Lamar University.

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION: Ed. 1201.

Education 1201, College Reading and Writing Skills was introduced at Lamar University in the fall of 1977. Students are graded pass/not pass and those passing receive two semester hours elective credit. Education 1201 is a systematic program of instruction and guidance designed to provide students an opportunity to develop the efficient study skills and effective academic attitudes necessary for satisfactory performance in college courses. The overriding course objectives are to help students become efficient, effective learners and to become meaningfully involved in all aspects of university life.

The course is <u>not remedial</u>. It is designed to serve all students, both the very able learners and those with potential academic adjustment problems. Enrollment is voluntary and any student, regardless of standardized test scores or previous academic performance, is elegible to sign up for the course. The material covered in Education 1201 is reported

in Table 1. Inspection of this table will readily confirm that the course content is designed to benefit all students by helping them to make the most of their college experience.

The course is taught by carefully selected and trained peer counselors supervised by the Director of Learning Skills. The peer counselors are the heart of the program. They are successful upperclassmen students who are fully aware of how to survive in college and are anxious to help others succeed in college. As indicated in Table 2, the peer counselors are selected from all academic programs offered by the University. Teaching in pairs, the peer counselors are assigned to teach one section of Education 1201.

The peer counselors give their students straightforward, practical instruction and guidance that the students can readily understand and apply. They help the students practice and transfer these skills to their other classes. The students have ample opportunity to participate in group sessions and the group work provides the students with a base of support and a caring atmosphere in which they can feel comfortable in disclosing feelings about their problems and concerns. Within the group, students can receive feedback and advice from one another and are often suprised at the extent to which they share many of the same feelings and concerns although their specific academic problems will vary. The peer counselors are trained to lead group discussions, exercises, and activities focused on the topics listed in Table 1. The instruction is provided in an atmosphere that is much more informal than will be found in most courses, but it is no less legitimate in academic purpose and no less demanding of student performance. The course creates a simple interaction model where students can relate informally and personally--an oasis of warmth to provide a staying environment.

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION: Ed. 2310.

Upperclassmen selected for employment as peer counselors receive 40 clock hours of job specific and core skills training while concurrently working as peer counselors. Each trainee receives three semesters hours of elective college credit and a $100 stipend for completing the training program and working as a peer counselor for one semester. Education 2310, Peer Advisor-Counselor Training, meets from 11:00 to 12:15 each Tuesday and Thursday. The core skills portion of the course is taught during eight of the Tuesday sessions and the job specific training is provided during the remaining twenty-four class periods. The instructional materials employed to provide the core skills and job specific training are listed in Table 3. The expected competencies to be developed through Education 2310 are stated below.

Table 1

CONTENT SEQUENCE FOLLOWED BY PEER COUNSELORS TEACHING EDUCATION 1201

Week	Topics Covered
1st	Introduction to course objectives, procedures, and requirements; orientation to university policies, procedures, and student assistance programs.
2nd	Administration and interpretation of Survey of Study Habits and Attitudes (pre-test); overview of course topics, activities, and assignments.
3rd	Instruction and guidance on organizing and managing time and improving concentration.
4th	Instruction and guidance on listening actively, using mapping, and taking lecture notes.
5th	Instruction and guidance on using skimming and scanning, understanding graphs and tables, and reading and marking textbooks.
6th	Instruction and guidance on taking reading notes, summarizing concepts, and writing essay examinations.
7th	Instruction and guidance on taking objective tests and desensitizing test anxiety.
8th	Instruction and guidance on studying science and mathematics.
9th	Instruction and guidance on organizing and writing in-class themes and laboratory reports.
10th	Instruction and guidance on preparing and organizing out-of-class topic reports.
11th	Instruction and guidance on building vocabulary and improving spelling, grammar, and punctuation.
12th	Instruction and guidance on conducting library research and outlining material.
13th	Instruction and guidance on improving remembering and adapting material for oral presentation.
14th	Instruction and guidance on clarifying values, assessing options, making decisions, and setting goals.
15th	Instruction and guidance on improving scholastic motivation and interpersonal relations.
16th	Instruction and guidance on efficient, effective, systematic, and comprehensive techniques for reviewing.
17th	Administration and interpretation of Survey of Study Habits and Attitudes (post-test).
18th	Completion of course evaluation questionnaire; administration of Effective Study Test and Ed. 1201 final examination (optional).

NOTE: The above schedule is flexible in that the core skills training stresses that the peer counselors not be overly rigid in the presentation of recommended concepts and methods.

Table 2

ACADEMIC SCHOOLS ENROLLING THE 187 PEER COUNSELORS EMPLOYED TO TEACH ED. 1201 DURING THE SEVEN YEAR PERIOD FALL 1977-SPRING 1984

School	Number of Departments	Number of Counselors	Percent of Counselors
Business	13	80	31.4
Education	6	58	22.7
Liberal Arts	6	38	14.9
Fine and Applied Arts	4	23	9.0
Engineering	5	28	11.0
Sciences	9	28	11.0
Total	43	255*	100.0

*28 of the 227 peer counselors were seeking double majors and both majors were tabulated.

Core Skills Training Provided In Education 2310.

The core skills training emphasizes that the peer counselor should not be overly rigid or aggressive in the presentation of recommended concepts and methods for efficient and effective studying. The ultimate test of counseling effectiveness is whether or not the needs of the students are being met. The expected competencies to be developed through the core skills training are as follows:

(1) The ability to focus on and respond effectively to the student's verbal and nonverbal communication.

(2) The ability to create and sustain a facilitative relationship for counseling which communicates acceptance, warmth, empathy, genuineness, etc.

(3) The ability to provide both the amount of structure and the level of permissiveness needed for an effective counseling atmosphere.

(4) The ability to relate to the student in an open and honest fashion without imposing one's own values, attitudes, interests, and needs.

(5) The ability to facilitate student self-exploration to define behavioral problems and motivational concerns and clarify their impact on the student's life.

(6) The ability to help the student state meaningful, realistic, and concrete goals, means, and actions for self-improvement.

Table 3

INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIAL UTILIZED TO TRAIN PEER COUNSELORS ENROLLED IN EDUCATION 2310

Material Utilized To Provide Job Specific Training:

Hackney, H. and Nye, S. Counseling Strategies and Objectives

Material Utilized To Provide Job Specific Training:

Brown, W. F. Effective Study Course Instructor's Manual
Brown, W. F. Student Counselor's Handbook
Brown, W. F. Student's Guides to Effective Study
Brown, W. F. and Holtzman, W. H. Guide to College Survival
Pauk, W. How To Study In College
Robinson, F. P. Effective Study
Brown, W. F. and Forristall, D. Z. Effective Study Exercises
Brown, W. F. and others. Computer-Assisted Study Skills Improvement Program (CASSIP)
Brown, W. F. and others. Study Skills Notebook
Brown, W. F. Study Skills Surveys (SSS)
Brown, W. F. Effective Study Test (EST)
Brown, W. F. and Holtzman, W. H. Survey of Study Habits and Attitudes
Brown, W. F. and Gadzella, B. M. Study Skills Test (SST)

Job Specific Training Provided in Education 2310.

A combination of presentation, demonstration, and simulation approaches are utilized to provide training in using the methods and materials employed in Education 1201. The expected competencies to be developed through the job specific training are as follows:

(1) The ability to administer, score, and interpret the standardized tests and questionnaires used in Education 1201 and utilize the assessment results to motivate learning behavior improvement.

(2) The ability to present, demonstrate, and explain the proven concepts and methods, as outlined in Table 1, for acquiring efficient study skills and effective academic attitudes.

(3) The ability to help students become informed about university policies and procedures and the help available from faculty advisors and other sources.

(4) The ability to monitor, guide, and motivate student progress in learning and using the proven concepts and methods for efficient and effective studying.

(5) The ability to demonstrate and explain how to operate the Apple II+ and IIe microcomputers and how to use the twelve disks comprising the Computer-Assisted Study Skills Improvement Program (CASSIP).

FOUR-YEAR FOLLOW-UP EVALUATION OF EDUCATION 1201

During the 1977-1978 academic year, 217 students enrolled in 10 sections of Education 1201 taught by 21 peer counselors. During the 1983-1984 academic year, 542 students enrolled in 20 sections taught by 40 peer counselors. However, the fact that enrollment increased by almost 250 percent over a seven year period does not, of itself, assure a significant increase in the student retention rate.

Table 4

EDUCATION 1201 ENROLLMENT DATA FOR SEVEN-YEAR PERIOD

FALL 1977-SPRING 1984

Year	Semester	Sections Offered	Peer Counselors Employed	Students Enrolled
1977	FALL	5	11	84
1978	SPRING	5	10	133
1978	FALL	7	14	188
1979	SPRING	5	12	108
1979	FALL	8	17	229
1980	SPRING	6	11	145
1980	FALL	9	17	255
1981	SPRING	6	11	103
1981	FALL	12	27	359
1982	SPRING	4	13	183
1982	FALL	12	25	312
1983	SPRING	9	19	186
1983	FALL	12	24	353
1984	SPRING	8	16	189
Total		110	227	2,827

Table 5

GRADES GIVEN TO 184 FRESHMEN ENROLLED IN EDUCATION 1201

FALL SEMESTER 1978

GRADE	MEANING	NUMBER	PERCENT
"S"	PASS (Satisfactory)	163	88.6
"U"	FAIL (Unsatisfactory)	9	4.9
"W"	WITHDREW	9	4.9
"Q"	DROPPED	2	1.1
"I"	INCOMPLETE	1	.5
Total		184	100.0

Table 6

ENROLLMENT STATUS FOUR YEARS LATER FOR THE 163 FRESHMEN

PASSING EDUCATION 1201 IN FALL SEMESTER 1978

Enrollment Status	Number	Percent
Graduated from Lamar University	38	23.3
Enrolled at Lamar University	46	28.2
Graduated Elsewhere	10	6.1
Enrolled Elsewhere	18	11.1
Confirmed 4-year Retention Rate	112	68.7
No Longer Attending College	35	21.5
Unable To Locate	16	9.8
Probable 4-year Attrition Rate	51	31.3
Total	163	100.0

As indicated in Table 4, 2,827 students have enrolled in the 110 sections offered during the seven years since Education 1201 was first introduced at Lamar University. Hopefully, the retention rate for these students was significantly higher than that for the total student body. If the retention rate was not significantly higher, the justification for retaining Education 1201 would definitely be questionable.

Table 7

SCHOLASTIC APTITUTE TEST (SAT) SCORES FOR THE 163 FRESHMEN PASSING EDUCATION 1201 IN FALL SEMESTER 1978

Enrollment Status	SCHOLASTIC APTITUDE TEST SCORE 700 and Over Number	Percent	699 and Under Number	Percent
Graduated From College	34	20.8	14	8.6
Enrolled In College	30	18.4	34	20.9
CONFIRMED 4-YEAR RETENTION RATE	64	39.2	48	29.5
No Longer Attending College	16	9.8	19	11.7
Unable To Locate	5	3.1	11	6.7
PROBABLE 4-YEAR ATTRITION RATE	21	14.7	30	18.4
Total	85	52.1	78	47.9

To determine the course's impact upon student retention, the 163 freshmen passing Education 1201 in Fall 1978 were systematically tracked for the next four years. Table 5 reports the grades received by the 184 freshmen enrolled in Fall 1978. Only those students satisfactorily completing the course were included in the follow-up study.

Table 6 reports the enrollment status for the 163 students four years later. As indicated in the table, 29.4 percent had already graduated from college and another 39.3 percent were still attending college. Another 21.5 percent were confirmed to be no longer attending college and the remaining 9.8 percent could not be located and were presumed to not be attending college. Thus the confirmed four-year retention rate for the 163 students was 68.7 percent and the probable attrition rate was 31.3 percent.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The four-year retention rate at Lamar University is reported to average about 33 percent. Thus the course's impact upon retention would appear to be very significant. However, the motivation behind a student volunteering to enroll in the course was not taken into account and must be considered to be an uncontrolled interveining variable in the study. Even so, it is very unlikely that this factor alone could account for the increase from 33 percent to 68.7 percent retention.

Scholastic ability could be another uncontrolled intervening variable influencing the outcome of the investigation. However, as indicated in Table 7, 78 or 47.9 percent of the 163 students had earned SAT scores below 700. Since the average SAT score for all entering freshmen at Lamar University is considerably above 700, the significantly higher retention rate for the 163 students completing Education 1201 cannot be explained on the basis of their SAT scores.

In Fall 1978, 163 freshmen satisfactorily completed Education 1201, College Reading and Writing Skills, a course designed to provide student-to-student instruction and guidance on efficient study skills and effective academic attitudes. A four-year follow-up study of these students revealed that at least 63.7 percent had either graduated from college or were still enrolled in college--a four-year retention rate more than twice that reported for all entering freshmen at Lamar University. This significantly higher retention rate is especially meaningful because the SAT scores for 47.9 percent of the 163 students were below 700.

In light of these findings, it appears reasonable to conclude that the four-year retention rate will be significantly improved when beginning freshmen are provided a systematic, peer-presented, learning assistance program focused on the developoment of efficient study skills and effective academic attitudes. Adequately supported learning assistance programs are capable of accomplishing the twin goals of improving academic performance and reducing college dropouts. Higher education administrators should rethink their modest commitment to the learning assistance approach to reducing student attrition.

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